Which? Money: is it game over for the high street bank branch?

[00:00:00] **Lucia Ariano:** Bank branches, closing paper statements asked. Text alerts no longer coming through Is mobile banking fast becoming the only way to manage our cash. Welcome to Witch Money. Hello, I'm Lucia Ariano and welcome to our deep dive into the decline of traditional banking services. And with me today we have witch experts, Kiara Cavalieri and Josh Wilson.

[00:00:22] **Lucia Ariano:** Hello both. Hello.

[00:00:23] **Josh Wilson:** Hi there.

[00:00:24] **Lucia Ariano:** Thank you so much for coming on the show today. I mean, shall we start with a general picture? Kiara, you've done a big survey, um, and you've got a lot of thoughts from which members on banking services shall we start here? How, how are they feeling about them?

[00:00:37] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** So actually this is one where members came to us first.

[00:00:41] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Um, doesn't happen always that way, but we had a lot of members, um, who were pretty cheesed off with first direct specifically. Um, I think a lot of which members bank with first direct nationwide banks like that. And. So many of them contacted me directly to say that they were annoyed that they'd heard they would lose these free SMS alerts.

[00:01:01] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Um, these are just weekly balance alerts and I think, I think some people can get, um, many statements from them as well. Um, and they just couldn't understand why they were losing this useful, seemingly, fairly straightforward service. So they wanted. Me to ask why. I asked some of our members to get in touch and tell me if they had also lost a service or about to lose a service that they really enjoyed or really benefited from.

[00:01:26] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** And, and there were a lot of responses. I was quite surprised sometimes really small services being cut. Uh, things I wouldn't really think about. And some of them were, were bigger, so face-to-face appointments, for example. But we got the sense that actually there were. And there was some more digging to do.

[00:01:41] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** So we did, we did a bigger survey of our connect panel and yeah, it was quite revealing.

[00:01:46] **Lucia Ariano:** I'm glad you mentioned, you know, bank branches closing and ATMs closing. 'cause our, our, our listeners will know that over the years we've spoken about those a lot. But services, these services, like the ones you mentioned, these seem kind of new.

[00:01:58] **Lucia Ariano:** I mean the, the closures or that the ending to these services seem, seem new. Is that the case?

[00:02:03] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** I don't think it's so much that these. Services being cut is new, but I think it's becoming more noticeable. Mm. So, um, some things we've been aware of for a while. Lots of people have complained about losing paper statements, for example.

[00:02:16] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Mm. Or losing them as default and having to specifically ask for them to be sent to them. Uh, but actually there's a few more things. Some of the things I hadn't thought of before. Um, can coining machines at brand, that was

[00:02:28] **Lucia Ariano:** one that stuck in my mind as well. Yeah, it's a strange one.

[00:02:30] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Obviously I haven't.

[00:02:32] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Thought about it myself 'cause it's not something I do. But, um, a couple of people actually, not just, um, not just one, a couple had mentioned it specifically and one of them was, um, uh, a kind of box collector for, for a charity and she was, um, joint secretary for, um, the lifeboat charity and. She said it was really easy and kind of part, quite a nice part of her week that she'd just pop into her HSBC.

[00:02:57] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Uh, the coin accounting machine would do all the boring stuff for her. Mm. She'd get a little receipt at the end, job's done, and now it's a real faf. Mm.

[00:03:05] **Lucia Ariano:** I think the

[00:03:06] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** first time she was told that she'd have to just count it herself. And take it to account. I think now she gets a bit more help, but it's just one of those things where she thought, I use it.

[00:03:16] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** I know someone else uses it. There's always someone using it. When I pop in, why is it gone? Mm. And I think there's, the answer is always tough luck, basically. Mm. Or a, a more polite version of that. You just. There doesn't seem to be a way to stop it from happening because they're so seemingly small.

[00:03:33] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** They're not core services. You know, they're not your core bank account, your core app, core telephone banking services. They're usually the face-to-face stuff. Services that go first, and I think people are just a bit fed up.

[00:03:46] **Lucia Ariano:** That does seem like a, quite a, a niche example, but looking at the stats from our survey, you know, quite a substantial amount of people aren't happy.

[00:03:55] **Lucia Ariano:** You know, we've got here, I've got here that 35% said they don't feel valued by their banks. 22% are satisfied with, with branch banking, which I mean, does that imply that that 78%. Aren't satisfied.

[00:04:09] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Yeah, not far off. So I think the point that we were trying to make in the story is that satisfaction levels, you know, triple when you're talking about online banking and mobile banking.

[00:04:19] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** So I think the point that I wanted to make wa was that there does seem to be a SA two tier system emerging. It varies obviously from bank to bank. Some banks are better than others at, at telephone banking, for example. Mm-hmm. But I do think, I do think there's a case to be made that. There's a sense among customers that they're not as important if they don't use an app for their banking or online banking and that they're probably gonna expect shorter telephone banking hours, for example.

[00:04:49] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** That was one that came up a few times. Mm-hmm. Or that it might be harder to get a face-to-face. Appointment in a branch, or that their branch might have shorter opening hours or that certain services they used to rely on will be gone. I just think that that came through again and again and again when I spoke to people.

[00:05:05] **Lucia Ariano:** So, I mean, it does seem clear that digital services are being prioritized. I mean, why is that

[00:05:11] **Josh Wilson:** So, I think what's driving this is that there has been reduced footfall in. Retail bank branches and banks are seeing this and they're seeing that there. There has been pretty wide take up. By the public for digital banking services.

[00:05:29] **Josh Wilson:** A lot of people do use online banking. A lot of people have banking apps on their phones, and I think a lot of banks are maybe seeing this as an opportunity to reduce their retail footprint. I would say that's probably the main driver. You know, it's, it's to some extent, it is a bit of a cost cutting exercise.

[00:05:48] **Lucia Ariano:** And what more can you tell us about, about. Bank branch closures because as I mentioned, you know, we have talked about this a lot on the show, but not recently. So, you know, has it slowed down or is it still accelerating as it was?

[00:06:00] **Josh Wilson:** So, as the data journalist at which it's my job to track the bank branch closures across the country, and I can tell you that we're now on 6,510 branch closures since January, 2015.

[00:06:14] **Josh Wilson:** Wow. That's about 51 closures every month. Mm-hmm. And that's about 66%. Of the Nation's Total branch network that was operating in 2015. Wow. So it's been bad. So it's been really substantial. Yeah, it's been really substantial and it's, there's not really been, there has been a slight slowdown over the past couple of years, but we're still talking, we're still talking hundreds of branch closures every year.

[00:06:36] **Josh Wilson:** So it's, it's still substantial. And it's not just the bank branches either. It's also ATMs, you know, we've, we've. Uh, we've also found that, you know, eight, the 18,000 free to use ATMs have been lost in the uk, uh, between just between July, 2018 and December, 2024. So it's, it's really, there has been a widespread loss of physical access to cash services in the uk.

[00:07:02] **Josh Wilson:** Mm.

[00:07:02] **Lucia Ariano:** And does that mean that more and more people across the country are being left without a face-to-face? Bank, uh, or, or even without an a tm. Yeah, absolutely.

[00:07:11] **Josh Wilson:** Absolutely. That's absolutely the case. I ran a survey of which members earlier this year, which found that, um, 40% told us 40% of our members told us that they have lost access to their local bank branch over the past five years.

[00:07:25] **Josh Wilson:** So it is, it really, it really is substantial and it, it, it is something that affects consumers, but particularly older and more vulnerable groups of individuals who research has shown have a tendency to prefer face-to-face banking services and also are more likely to rely on physical cash for. Their, their day-to-day life.

[00:07:46] **Lucia Ariano:** So what are the alternatives, uh, if at all, what other options are there for people who are without now a local bank branch or, or an ATM?

[00:07:56] **Josh Wilson:** So there are a few alternatives. So for example, if you go to your local post office, most of the time you'll be able to do very basic counter services. There. Mostly just withdrawing and depositing money, paying bills, not really much else.

[00:08:10] **Josh Wilson:** Banks will also sometimes do fleets of mobile banking fans, which will visit certain communities on certain days of the week. Um, but you need to be really aware of when and where that's happening. But the most substantial solution that's been put forward by banks and by other algo organizations like the Financial Conduct Authority is community banking hubs, which is, they're essentially a shared banking space.

[00:08:37] **Josh Wilson:** Where consumers can go, doesn't matter which who you bank with, doesn't matter you know which bank you're a member of. You can go there. You'll be able to do basic counter services and you should also be able to, um, on a rotational basis, they will have banking representatives from. The major banks where you'll be able to do face-to-face banking that should be similar to the sort of face-to-face banking that you would've been able to do in your, your standard physical like Santander branch or HSBC branch.

[00:09:04] **Lucia Ariano:** And you recently went to one of those, didn't you, in welling? How? How was it?

[00:09:07] **Josh Wilson:** I did, that's right. So, which sent me on a little outing to. Uh, a community banking hub in Welling, which is in Southeast London, to get an idea of how they work and whether they're fit for purpose, essentially. Um, and the Welling Community Hub is a really interesting one.

[00:09:23] **Josh Wilson:** It's, it's on the Welling High Street. It opened at the back end of 2023 after Welling had lost Its, I, I believe it. Yeah. It, it Welling had lost its last bank branch by the time the Community Hub opened and it actually opened on the site of what had been the Barclays. Branch for Welling. Um, and it's now the case that for the entire constituency actually of, of Bexley and Sidcup there, there's only, I believe there's only one bank branch remaining and it's set to close.

[00:09:54] **Josh Wilson:** Uh, this month, next month, the hub in Welling will be one of the only locations that people in the area will be able to do any physical face-to-face banking. Mm. So it, it was a really interesting visit actually. The, um, it, it felt very like a traditional bank branch if a little bit on the small sides.

[00:10:11] **Josh Wilson:** Well, that's interesting

[00:10:12] **Lucia Ariano:** because actually I'm, I'm pleased you said that because when you say community banking hub, it kind of makes you well, made, made, made me think of, you know. Village hall space or o other community spaces. I'm, I'm imagining people banking in a leisure center or something. So, so, so this is, this is

[00:10:26] **Josh Wilson:** really interesting because a community banking hub, you know, the one in Welling was set up on what was previously a Barclays bank branch, but that's not gonna be the case for all community hubs.

[00:10:34] **Josh Wilson:** So, you know, if you were to go to your, your nearest local one, it might, it might be in a, what was previously a community center. Or a a a a village hall. I think some have even been set up in churches. Mm-hmm. Uh, some of them temporarily, a lot of the time they're temporarily set up in a particular location with plans to move them then to a more permanent location that would be more similar to, uh, uh, uh, the premises that a, a traditional banking branch would've been located on, if that makes.

[00:11:00] **Lucia Ariano:** It feels a little bit like a step back in time. Do you know what I mean? Yeah. Does it, I think it's kind of feels a bit kind of wartime or, or, or something like that. Kiara, you're laughing. I mean,

[00:11:10] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** I kind of know what you mean, but actually I think strangely it is. It is a step forward in the sense that when Josh refers to, you know, people seeing their community banker in a library, or that happened and that happened in lots of rural locations and others.

[00:11:27] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Mm. But I do think the idea of the banking hubs, at least they're being quite picky about. The locations they're choosing for that reason. They, they acknowledge, um, they acknowledge that these buildings need to be fit for purpose. I only say that because a million years ago, I, I wrote about post office, um, banking.

[00:11:46] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Um, because at the time banks were really trying to persuade everyone that it was fine to cut lots of branches because you could post, you could use a post office, sorry for your banking, but they were. Not fit for purpose in by any means. No wheelchair access, not private,

[00:12:02] **Lucia Ariano:** cramped.

[00:12:03] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** You are queuing up for your stamps or to deliver your parcel and then talk to someone about, I don't know, being recently bereaved, like just really inappropriate spaces.

[00:12:13] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** So the idea of a banking hub. Is to move away from that and to make sure that there is a sort of suitable premise. I don't think that's gonna be easy in every location, which is probably why it takes, you know, a while for them to find, they're speeding things up now, right Josh? But it was quite a slow start.

[00:12:32] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Yeah. So I think being confident about the type of building they're choosing is part of the process. So hopefully. Hopefully they will be, you know, suitable buildings and, and, and, and a former bank obviously makes a lot of sense because they're already set up that way and there should be always a private space and they should have considerations for disabled customers, et cetera.

[00:12:52] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** On,

[00:12:53] **Josh Wilson:** on that note, I will also say that, uh, when I was writing my piece, I did speak to Cash Access uk, who, they're the ones who manage the, the rollout of community hubs across the country. And they did tell me that, um. Yeah, the majority of community hubs are being designed with disability access in mind.

[00:13:08] **Josh Wilson:** Yeah. And they told me that every hub should be equipped with hearing loops and where possible most hubs should be wheelchair friendly. And I, I did notice as well that if you go on the Cash Access UK website, which has a list of all the, uh, currently active community hubs, if you go onto a particular Community hubs page, so if you were to look up your, your nearest community hub, it will tell you.

[00:13:28] **Josh Wilson:** All of the disability access information on that page. So it will tell you whether it's, uh, wheelchair accessible, it will tell you whether there's hearing loops, that kind of thing. So they, they are, they do have that front of mind, which was reassuring.

[00:13:42] **Lucia Ariano:** Well, I wanna hear more about your experience and I know you spoke to some people who, who use the Hub too.

[00:13:46] **Lucia Ariano:** So before we go there, let's just hear your chat with Rizwan, the community Hub Manager. Let's take a listen now.

[00:13:53] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** I'm the banking hub operator since. November, 2023 and first we are working with the different community banker on a TV basis. Like on Monday we have HSPC, Tuesday Network, Lloyd's on Wednesday, Barclays on Thursday.

[00:14:07] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** And half they sent tenderers. They come on Friday. But in respect of the bank, like what days they are going to be here to see the community banker, but they can come and use the post office counter services between Monday to Friday, for example. Monday is HSBC day. So if they want to see the community banker, they can come to feed them on Monday, but if they want to do with their own personal convictions or business deposits or check their balances, they can come Monday to Friday, nine to five.

[00:14:33] **Josh Wilson:** Do you know much about how this community hub came into being? Like was there a local campaign? Was there a campaign group? Did local politicians get involved?

[00:14:40] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** Yes. The local mp, Louis French, he was quite involved, um, to get the community, uh, to get the banking hub, uh, in welling. Hmm. Uh, because the last bank was closed in, uh, uh, like in 2023.

[00:14:53] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** And the community do requires the banking hub. So especially our vulnerable and elderly customers, they want to withdraw their pensions and, uh, they. Don't trust on ATM's machines. And plus they want someone to see them face to face rather than talk to the machine. So that's why we are here for, yes, local mps they have done, like, you know, they have, they have made some local campaigns.

[00:15:16] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** They were in contact with Sketch Access UK on the Lake website.

[00:15:20] **Josh Wilson:** And I mean, do you think that it's important for. The local members of the local community still have a, a place to do physical banking. A

[00:15:27] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** hundred percent. It is very important. It is essential as well. As well as important. It is essential as well.

[00:15:34] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** Banking hub has to be in the community. Uh, reason because of the way the bank and building societies, they are closing their branches in different areas in the uk. So if the local community, they are out of bank, like, you know, they don't know where to go, they have to go to the nearest town centers or like, you know.

[00:15:52] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** They have to travel miles away, uh, which is not a good customer journey for them. Kind of, as I mentioned about the vulnerable customers, they, they, we mean we might be the only contact for them to see on day, face-to-face routines. Mm-hmm. Uh, especially the pensioners, our pensioners, they come and they withdraw their pension from here.

[00:16:12] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** Mm-hmm. If we are not here at the banking hub is not in the town center, they have to go to the nearest bank, which is quite far distances. So yes, it is very important and essential. To keep the banking hub in, in the town center.

[00:16:25] **Josh Wilson:** So what kind of area would you say that this community hub serves? Like is it all of welling?

[00:16:29] **Josh Wilson:** Does it, like, do you see people coming in from even further afield, would you say? No, we

[00:16:33] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** have, we have seen, we have seen people, they are coming from further, further places as when, but most of them, they are within the community, like, you know, nearby the areas like, you know, we have quite residential areas here at people.

[00:16:45] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** They are coming to withdraw their pension local businesses, they want to deposit it there. Money in their accounts.

[00:16:51] **Josh Wilson:** So do you do business banking care? You do business, do business banking?

[00:16:54] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** We do business banking here. People, they are coming here to deposit their money in their business accounts, in their personal accounts.

[00:17:00] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** People they want to deposit their checks. They are coming to do the checks here. We do bill payments as well. We do pay points and pay station.

[00:17:07] **Josh Wilson:** In terms of the physical bank ranches that used to be here, have you noticed, like over the past few years, did you notice them like closing down?

[00:17:16] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** Yeah, when we moved to here, when Welling Banking helped, there was no banking building Society left over here.

[00:17:21] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** So people, they have to travel for other various reasons. They go to Bethle Heat Town Center.

[00:17:27] **Josh Wilson:** How often is it, or how many instances do you get of say, someone coming in to do some banking, but it's something that you end up not being able to help them with?

[00:17:34] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** What we do normally, if they have to do anything with their banking needs, we have to refer those customers to our community Bankers.

[00:17:42] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** And then the most of the transactions, most of them, their needs. The community banker result in branch. Yeah. If something is not in hand in our hand or we cannot do it in banking hub, then we doward those customers to the newest bank. Are

[00:17:56] **Josh Wilson:** customers able to book in advance if they want to see like, 'cause obviously I know that the communi, the, the.

[00:18:03] **Josh Wilson:** The bank representatives are only in on a certain day of the week, but could someone book in to see that person on that particular day?

[00:18:09] **Rizwan Salahuddin:** Some of the banks, some of the banks, they do provide that service to book an appointment. Like I know that Barclays, they do provide that service, but here, if someone wants to walk in, they can walk in and they can wait here, and as soon as the community banker is free, they can directly serve them with.

[00:18:26] **Lucia Ariano:** Oh, a huge thank you to Rizwan for, for chatting with us. I mean, that sounds relatively positive. Um, what did you make of your experience there, Josh, as a, on a whole?

[00:18:35] **Josh Wilson:** So it was really interesting when I went in, I was really reminded it was almost like a cross between a post office and tra uh, traditional bank branch.

[00:18:43] **Josh Wilson:** But imagine a post office, you know, doesn't have the envelopes in the stationary and everything. Mm-hmm. There's, uh, every community hub should have a counter service, which this one did in welling. And the counter service is run by post office staff, not not banking staff. And you will be able to, at the counter, that's where you do your basic.

[00:19:03] **Josh Wilson:** Every day banking services like withdrawals, deposits, paying bills, not too much else. That's what you do at the counter service. Now, there should also be, uh, a private space. In the case of welling, it was like, it was a glass room that had frosted frosted glass walls. Uh, so, so you couldn't see directly in, and it was a private space, uh, with a big table, chairs, laptop, telephone.

[00:19:29] **Josh Wilson:** And that's where each day of the week, there would be a representative from different banks there. Mm-hmm. So the day I went was I went on a Friday and that was Santander's day.

[00:19:39] **Lucia Ariano:** And so can you expect that your bank, whichever household bank that you used to bank with on the High Street, would be represented at one of these hubs.

[00:19:49] **Josh Wilson:** So this is one of the issues with community hubs is that you won't get every bank represented by them. What I was told by Cash Access UK is that they look at which banks were present in, let's say the town that they're thinking of putting a community hub in. Based on that, that should be the banks that are then present in the community hub.

[00:20:11] **Lucia Ariano:** Mm-hmm.

[00:20:11] **Josh Wilson:** This is obviously not ideal for a few different reasons because, you know, for one thing, there's, there's always going to be some people who are with a bank that's not being represented by that hub, and the fact as well, that community hubs don't just tend to serve that one. Say town or area that it's located in, but they also tend to serve the surrounding, surrounding like local population areas as well.

[00:20:32] **Josh Wilson:** There are going to be cases where banks aren't represented and there are members of the local community who are with a bank that is not represented.

[00:20:40] **Lucia Ariano:** I mean, it does sound like banks are trying to fill the gap that they've created. I mean, so I mean, are they aware then of the impact of all these closures and, and are they really doing their bit to.

[00:20:52] **Lucia Ariano:** To, to fill the gap?

[00:20:54] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Well, I'm, I'm a cynic, so I, I looked into this a while ago, and they, to me it's a, it was a, a box ticking exercise, but they do, mm-hmm. They do, in theory, do impact analysis when they announce a closure. So in theory, they're meant to say, you know. What the footfall is, what service is being used, the age and the, the, sorry, the age bracket and vulnerability status of those customers.

[00:21:20] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** But I think I, I can't remember when I looked at this a few years ago, but I remember there wasn't a single case of a decision being reversed, which I think speaks volumes if you do an impact assessment and every and 100% of your impact assessments means you still close the branch then to me. It's a box sticking exercise.

[00:21:39] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Um, but you know, it, it's a commercial decision fundamentally. Mm. It's a commercial decision. If you don't want to keep a branch open, broadly speaking, you don't have to. There are now stronger rules in place thanks to our campaign win when it comes to the provision of cash, which branches become a part of.

[00:21:58] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** So I think, you know, banking hubs, we'll see. We'll. More of them, and hopefully they'll be hugely successful and we're all really happy about them because it's that or almost nothing. Mm. Um, when it comes to face-to-face services anyway, I think it's, it's a tricky one because a bank account feels like such a fundamental basic right now.

[00:22:18] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Mm. You need one to do so many things that it becomes. An essential service.

[00:22:24] **Lucia Ariano:** What about, say the financial conduct authority, the FCA are, are they present within all of this? You know, do they, do they have an angle?

[00:22:31] **Josh Wilson:** So I have spoken to the financial conduct authority about this because they do have, these community hubs are within their remit.

[00:22:39] **Josh Wilson:** So one of the issues that I raised with them, and it's an issue that exists within community hubs, is that there's no. Minimum set of services that they need to provide when it comes to the, the banking representatives, you know, where you go and sit in the private room. So for example, a lot of the time you won't be able to do some of the, the very more advanced things that you would've been able to do mm-hmm.

[00:23:02] **Josh Wilson:** In a traditional. Retail banking branch. Now, this could be things like, um, sorting out probate. This could be things like trying to secure a mortgage, things you would've been able to do a, a traditional bank branch, but that you, you may not be able to do even with your banking representative at a community hub.

[00:23:21] **Josh Wilson:** I did speak to the FCA about this and ask them, are you gonna introduce minimum levels of provision that these banks need to provide, that, you know, the community bankers need to provide? And they, I, I was told it's something that they're looking into. There's nothing concrete planned on it at the moment.

[00:23:35] **Josh Wilson:** Essentially,

[00:23:36] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** one thing that really winds me up is when a bank insists that you do something in a branch. I have to admit it doesn't happen very often. And, and you know, more and more you can do everything online with them. Mm-hmm. But, but occasionally you can't. So actually, but um, a few years ago, someone.

[00:23:53] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Uh, wrote to me to complain 'cause she had been asked to pop into a branch to register a power of attorney. Mm. And she was nowhere near a branch. It was such a faf, not only taking time off holiday and finding a time when her and her brother. It could both be there because they both had to be present. She said it was so annoying because so many of this particular branch, um, sorry, this particular bank branches have had closed, and I just thought the cheek.

[00:24:20] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Mm-hmm. The cheek of insisting that you have to go into a branch. When you've cut them, when you've removed them all.

[00:24:27] **Lucia Ariano:** Well, that's a really good example, and I feel like whenever we've been having these examples throughout today's show, it does really just illustrate what we're talking about. And just to go back then to talking about the hubs, who did you speak to at the hubs?

[00:24:40] **Lucia Ariano:** You know, how did, how did they find using them, Josh?

[00:24:42] **Josh Wilson:** So I didn't speak to anybody. That was using the hub at the Welling Hub, but I have spoken to several people who have used community hubs around the country. Mm-hmm. And spoke to me about their experiences using them, and I would say that the main thing that came through from it was which members that I was speaking to.

[00:24:59] **Josh Wilson:** The main thing that came across when I was speaking to them was that broadly they thought that community hubs were the right idea. Right. This shared space where it doesn't matter who, who you bank with, you can go there and you can do your face-to-face banking. Right. That's a good idea. Mm-hmm. The main issues that they raised with me were some of the stuff we've already spoken about.

[00:25:17] **Josh Wilson:** So like for example, not being certain on what exactly you can do at a community hub, the sort of services that they provide. The other thing that came through a lot as well is that a lot of our members were unhappy about the fact that they can't just like, so in the past when they wanted to do face-to-face banking, they might just be like out in town doing some shopping and then they'll just be like, oh, I'll, I'll just pop into into the local bank branch 'cause they need to do a better at banking.

[00:25:45] **Josh Wilson:** So it was not something they ever really had to think about. But now with community hubs. You really need to plan around it. You need to look at when it's open, you need to look at which day your bank is gonna be present. You need to look at, they might not be there all day either. They might only be there for half a day.

[00:26:00] **Josh Wilson:** You might need to book in advance. These are all little things that just kind of add to the difficulty around now doing face-to-face banking that wasn't previously a problem for a lot of people. The other thing that came through a lot, it was frustration that. A lot of these, a lot of the time, these community hubs where they're opening, not only are they there to serve that, say that particular town, they're also serving the surrounding towns and villages.

[00:26:27] **Josh Wilson:** So it's not the case anymore that you can just, it's a 10 minute walk to your nearest. Local bank branch, 'cause of the town you're in, you have to take like a, for example, a 20 minute drive to the town, one town over because that's where the community hub is. And you know, it's been deemed that that community hub is, is a good enough service provision to cover that town and all the surrounding towns.

[00:26:47] **Josh Wilson:** So it's, it's now a much more kind of in depth. Uh, process mm-hmm. Compared to what it was before. I think that's one of the main things that came through to me is it, it is no longer an easy thing that you don't really have to think about anymore. You really have to put planning and thought into it.

[00:27:03] **Josh Wilson:** Mm-hmm. And as, as well, that it still requires a certain level of digital literacy because you need to be able to, or it's helpful to be able to go online. Find out where your nearest community hub is, find out what services are being offered because your bank should list what they offer at that, at that particular community hub, although I don't think they're actually forced to.

[00:27:22] **Josh Wilson:** And then you also need to be able to, uh, call up and book an appointment because you don't want to turn up, because that's when I went to the Welling hub, you know, there was just the one room, there was just the one, uh, community banking representative. It, it's not like I remember, you know, when I used to go to my local branch when I was a lot younger, they had multiple rooms and multiple, multiple members of staff who you'd be able to speak to and would be able to help you.

[00:27:48] **Josh Wilson:** You be a queue with complex, there'd be, there'd be a queue. Yeah. And ev even where there's, you know, three or four private rooms, there'd still be a queue to use them. So if there's only, if there's only the one room or even if there's two rooms, um, yeah, it's a much more in depth process.

[00:28:02] **Lucia Ariano:** And I suppose it, it does feel like the elephant in the room.

[00:28:05] **Lucia Ariano:** Is that it, it's quite difficult for any vulnerable customers if, you know, you can't drive to one of these hubs. Yes, exactly. Or if you don't have the, the kind of minimum level of digital literacy that you just spoke about. Mm-hmm.

[00:28:17] **Josh Wilson:** Or if you're in an area where public transport isn't great. Mm-hmm.

[00:28:20] **Lucia Ariano:** I mean, I guess that leads me to the question, you know, do banks need to be doing more?

[00:28:24] **Lucia Ariano:** Um, and Kiara, you are nodding. Do you wanna start? I do think they need to

[00:28:28] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** do more. Mm-hmm. Um, I think we've, we've said this before, it's not about saying that, um, online banking and mobile banking. Um, aren't great. They're great. The people that use it like it, it's convenient, it's quick. Broadly speaking, it's secure if you are careful.

[00:28:44] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Um, but you shouldn't be penalized if you don't want to, to, to use those services. Telephone banking, branch banking should be fit for purpose. Um, and I, I'm concerned that they're not or that they're increasingly not. Um. One woman I spoke to, she stayed with me because she was genuinely scared that her bank would find out that she had the internet, which really shocked me.

[00:29:09] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** Um, I'm not saying that her bank obviously would've done this. Mm-hmm. But it, I think it's interesting that her fear was that if the, if the bank found out that she had the internet at home, which she used for emailing her family, um, and a bit of online shopping, um, that they would, uh. Force her to use online or mobile banking, and she just doesn't want to use it.

[00:29:31] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** She doesn't feel confident. She doesn't understand the security, um, systems that are being used. She's, she's nervous. She shouldn't be forced to do it. Mm. She's perfectly happy doing telephone banking, but those hours have been reduced. It's, it's more difficult for her to do her telephone banking now because the hours have been heavily reduced and I think I just want banks to remember.

[00:29:54] **Chiara Cavaglieri:** That, you know, a internet use doesn't mean, um, that you are confident or capable when it comes digital banking. And also that you shouldn't forget your very loyal customers who've been banking with you for decades who want to use telephone banking and want the, um, standards of service to stay the same.

[00:30:14] **Lucia Ariano:** I mean, very well put. And it's undeniable that I think, you know, banks do need to do more. I mean, in the meantime, Josh, you can apply for a hub in your area. Um, so talk us through how that works.

[00:30:26] **Josh Wilson:** Yeah, that's right. So. The community hub in Welling, um, actually came about through a, uh, a community, like a campaign, which you can do.

[00:30:37] **Josh Wilson:** Uh, and I mean, the one in Welling was led by local politicians, but anybody can put in a request for a community hub in your area. Uh, what all you have to do is go to Link dot code uk. Uh, link are the, um, they manage all of the a or the vast majority of the ATMs in the uk, but they also have responsibility.

[00:30:55] **Josh Wilson:** For assessing an area to see if it, it needs a new ATM or if it needs, uh, a community banking hub. So all you have to do is go to their website. There

[00:31:05] **Lucia Ariano:** is some irony of having to go to the, go to a website for this, isn't there? Yeah, yeah, yeah,

[00:31:08] **Josh Wilson:** indeed. So it does require a level of data literacy. Yes, indeed.

[00:31:13] **Josh Wilson:** Um, you have to go to the website, you have to fill out a form. Um, and basically you need to be able to explain why you think your area needs a, needs a community hub. And it it, it's helpful to put in as much information as possible about what services previously existed in the area and what services have been lost.

[00:31:32] **Josh Wilson:** What should happen from there is links should assess the area to see what services there were, what services have been lost, what services they think it requires, and if they think that it may require. You know, uh, additional banking services, they should do an onsite visit where they'll come and they'll actually physically assess.

[00:31:50] **Josh Wilson:** The area. And if they then decide that additional cash services are needed, they should make, uh, a final recommendation for, it could be an ATM, it could be a foreign community banking hub, and that they have a set of criteria that they go through when deciding which areas should have a wall. But if they decide that a hub is warranted, they then pass that across to Cash Access uk, which then should continue and should, should, um, confirm a, a site and should start planning one in in your area.

[00:32:19] **Josh Wilson:** And, and I mean. This can take, this can take a little while. Um, you know, it can take, should take, you know, anywhere sort of up to a year, year and a half, something like that. So it's not gonna be a super quick process, but it is something that anybody can do.

[00:32:30] **Lucia Ariano:** Thank you, Josh. And we'll get a link to that in the description of today's show.

[00:32:34] **Lucia Ariano:** And thank you too to Kiara for coming on the show today. Thank you.

[00:32:36] **Josh Wilson:** Thanks for having me.

[00:32:40] **Lucia Ariano:** Thanks for listening to this podcast from which the UK's consumer champion. You can find plenty more advice about what we discuss today in the show notes. There you'll also find a link to become a witch member for 50% off the usual price and offer exclusively available to you, our podcast listeners joining, which will not only give you our.

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